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108-172 Forum to be held in CR on Great Places initiative

For anyone who has ever tried to engineer their way through the hundreds of state agencies, procedures and routines to bring an idea or vision to life, Gov. Tom Vilsack's Great Places initiative is sure to be a saving grace.

Iowa Great Places, announced by Mr. Vilsack in his condition of the state address in January, is designed to streamline government programs, making it easier to connect those who have an idea with those state agencies and programs that can bring the ideas to life.

Those in the Corridor will have a chance to learn more about the program and their ideas about local Great Places when organizers come to CSPA, 1103 Third St. SE in Cedar Rapids June 1 to hold a public forum. Anita Walker, director of the Iowa Department of Cultural Affairs and Lt. Gov. Sally Pederson will host the event.

According to the initiative's web site, Great Places is designed to "make good places great" by bringing together the resources of state government to build capacity in communities, regions or neighborhoods that cultivate the qualities that make a place special.

Great places, it said, have a "unique sense of place," "an engaging experiences," "a rich, diverse social fabric," "a vital, creative economy," among other things.

A total of 18 state agencies will be working with Iowans to stimulate ideas and planning, streamline access to available state resources, help leverage local and private resources and share technical expertise.

Organizers hope to create an atmosphere in which state government and Iowans will work together to synchronize and streamline programs to fit a place's vision, not to make the vision fit state programs.

Peggy Whitworth, executive director of Brucemore, said she thinks the initiative

provides a new way to look at governing.

"The key thing is how the various parts of state government can work together to assist local communities to realize Great Places," she said. She said that the initiative will also increase government efficiency because people won't have to go to 18 different agencies, just one.

"I think it's really an exciting initiative," she said. "Clearly in the Corridor there are many great places, and there might be something said about the Corridor being a Great Place."

Though organizers acknowledge that the concept may be abstract and conceptual at first, they hope the 10 public forums that will be held across the state in coming weeks will clarify that.

"It's a really innovative approach, of both encouraging bold thought in communities and regions and also demystifying state government," said Monica Fischer, Great Places coordinator.

Communities, regions and districts that wish to become one of Iowa's Great Places have to submit an "invitation" by July 1 to the Great Places team.

Throughout July and August, Great Places "coaches" will then work with each place to get their offers ready for a final selection presentation in September. By October 1, a citizen advisory council appointed by Mr. Vilsack will help select the three pilot Great Places.

Negotiation of partnership agreements with those places will take place through the fall, with final agreements by Dec. 31, 2005. Funding will be applied to program design, preparation of communities and investment through grants, loans, technical assistance and services to pilot Great Places.

For more information about the Great Places initiative or to register for the public forum, please visit www.iowagreat-places.gov.